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ABSTRACT

Although "theory" has been used increasingly in analysis of literary texts, performances, and historical events, theater history has been slow to appropriate this approach. New Historicism insists upon understanding literature as the product of a particular time and society in which it was written or produced. It gives attention to representations of race, ethnicity, class and gender; it is grounded in questions of power and construction. These theories run counter to earlier, positivist methods, such as that of Oscar Brockett, which proposes a four-step methodology, in which the gathering of historical facts precedes the interpretation of them. Bruce McConachie, for instance, lays out an approach that he calls "postpositivist theater history." It is influenced by phenomenologists and structuralists who believe that all events and texts, including playscripts and performances, are influenced significantly by their culture and context. Understanding is not direct but negotiated between the historian and the text or event. Further, Thomas Postlewait explains that interpretation does not occur after the gathering of "facts" but at all stages of the historian's process. Theorists also prefer the specific to the general. They recognize large sweeping movements as constructs and would rather the student of history concentrate on the localized, specific and narrow. These approaches can and should be incorporated into classroom practices; the more original texts and documents examined the better. (Contains 21 references.) (TB)

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Teaching Theatre History:

The Influence of Historiographical Theory on Pedagogy

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During the twentieth century, "theory" has been used increasingly in the analysis of literary texts, performances, and historical events. History has lagged behind other disciplines in this regard because of its interest in "facts" and the "historical method" which contribute to the myths of objectivity and a value-free approach to sources, documents and the past in general. *Theatre* history has taken even longer to appropriate these ideas, due primarily to the intense interest in production, particularly in college theatre departments. Even "historical" plays only require a historical "style" to indicate "the past," temporally removed from the audience. With the expansion of the meaning of "performance" to include "theatrical," theatre artists have been forced to look more seriously at the theories behind the work of solo performance artists. According to Bonnie Marranca, this shift is not due to an opening up of the understanding of theatre, but rather to "the art world's move closer to the concerns and techniques associated with theatre" while "the theatre world was de-theatricalizing" (67). Marranca insists that the parallel histories of avant-garde theatre and solo performance must be integrated in the contemporary "theatre" curriculum, then related to "the history of ideas" (69).

Not everyone agrees that this is a positive direction for the future of theatre, performance, and history. Alice M. Robinson recently has written "in defense of university theatre or Theatre Arts departments that continue to teach dramatic literature, performance, and production, all well grounded on a solid base of theatre history and criticism." She advocates a re-emphasis of the traditional structure and understanding of the theatre curriculum in the following terms: "the university theatre owes it to itself, its students, and its audience to try to discover and present through the drama universal human experiences, emotions, and ideas" (91). This appeal to "universals" is precisely the kind of thinking which contemporary theory attempts to expose as actually value-laden and biased toward a specific (in this case Western European) worldview.

What are some of these theories? For the theatre, literary theorists are a major source. "New Historicism" insists upon understanding literature as the product of the particular time and society in which it was written, or "produced." Bruce McConachie finds three specific targets for the methodology of new historicism in the study of theatre history:

> . . . historical erasures and representations of race, ethnicity, class, and gender in the American theater; context, narrativity, and explanation in constructions of the theatrical past; and the ideological limitations of theatrical realism in America. Under the interdisciplinary gaze of New Historicism, these three topics will generate significant tensions that any new history of the field must either contain or resolve. ("New Historicism" 268)

McConachie's ideas, like those of many historians, are grounded in a broader definition of theatre than that which undergirds traditional "theatre history." As he defines it in his article on "postpositivist theatre history," theatre is: "a type of ritual which functions to legitimate an image of a historical social order in the minds of its audience" ("Postpositivist" 466).

Most, if not all, of these theories are grounded in questions of power and construction. Many use the concept of "hegemony" drawn from Antonio Gramsci.[1] This emphasis on domination has been seen as an effective way to understand how minority groups of all kinds work within the systems where they live to challenge them and create their own identities, which are still inextricably interwoven in the complex of the dominating forces. In the introduction to a collection of essays entitled Pedagogy is Politics, editor Maria-Regina Kecht suggests that the goals of a theory-based education are bound up very closely with these ideas:

> The students should learn *how* to "theorize," which means they should become proficient in an intellectual activity that questions the given, discerns the unsaid, discovers alternatives, and forgoes immediate practical usefulness. Teaching theory as an activity rather than a body of knowledge--teaching to theorize--fulfills the political need to *arouse skepticism about structures of authority*. (14-15, *italics mine*)

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[1] Gramsci's ideas may be found in: Antonio Gramsci, Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci, ed. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell-Smith (New York: International Publishers, 1971); and Selections from Cultural Writings, ed. David Gorgacs and Geoffrey Nowell-Smith (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1985).

Kecht's comments raise important questions about the goals of education, and suggest that the traditional model of the teacher as fountain of knowledge filling the students' empty vessels is completely bankrupt.

How have these theories been appropriated or adapted by theatre historians? In order to understand this element, central to the development of a new pedagogy for theatre history, we must first understand what these "theories" are reacting to. Oscar Brockett is the best-known and most widely-used theatre historian. His History of the Theatre, currently in its 7th edition (1995), is the standard text for most undergraduate courses. Brockett's approach to theatre history has been described as "positivism." It is characterized by the belief that facts are knowable, and that the knowledge and understanding of facts will lead the student to an understanding of general ideas, trends and themes. There is also an indication that the presentation of those facts is value-free, and will allow students and other readers to "make up their own minds."

In the afterword to his History of the Theatre on historiographical method and approach, Brockett says the tripartite goal of his history writing is to "describe, explain, or interpret" the events of "various times and places" (669). This method involves four steps in dealing with the material. First, the historian must "examine the residue of the past," meaning any evidence (documents or sites) which has survived from the period to now. Second, the historian naturally cannot deal with all of the material, and must "select . . . the portions thought pertinent" and, third, use that "evidence through a combination of logic and imagination." Finally, historians do not exist for their own gratification, but to communicate to "the world," however small, what they have found. This step, Brockett says, calls for "a description or interpretation" (670).

Brockett admits that there are personal biases and choices inherent in each step: "what historians see when they look at the past is conditioned in part by the interests, values, and assumptions of the culture in which they live . . . . their own individual interests, ideology, and methodology" (670). He describes the final product as "a rhetorical construct that seeks to convince the reader of its validity through the cohesion among its statements of topic or hypothesis, its selection and use of evidence, and its interpretation of the evidence" (670).

Bruce McConachie proposes another approach to theatre history in the late twentieth century. In keeping with the vague jargon of our times, he calls this movement "postpositivist theatre history," which only tells us that "positivism" must be passé. As McConachie puts it, "postpositivism is primarily a critique of positivism" ("Postpositivist" 467). McConachie's approach is influenced by phenomenologists and structuralists who believe that all events and texts (including playscripts and performances) are influenced significantly by their culture and context.[2] Understanding is not direct, but negotiated between the historian and the "text" or event. We are limited by the cultural conditions in which we live, and therefore cannot reach a full understanding of others' cultural conditions. However, our awareness of these conditions and their role in developing what we write and who we are allows us to look for these same kinds of influences in other periods and places. Instead of doing close readings of Shakespeare's texts, we need to find out as much as we can about the socio-economic conditions surrounding the writing and production of a particular play. If there are a number of manuscript editions of it, there may well be cultural reasons for changes, whether censorship, experience, or something else. In other words, this approach asks for very specific information and scholarship. Details are the key.

The theme of "context" is common in late twentieth-century historiography. Paul Kuritz acknowledges in the Preface to his Making of Theatre History that "the theatre always has something to do with its social environment, even when it tries not to" (*xi*). That context exerts an overwhelming influence on individuals, the event, and the product. Bruce McConachie summarizes his recent approach to nineteenth-century melodrama in this two-part question: "What types of melodramatic experiences did nineteenth-century theatregoers participate in and what meanings did they construct from them?" (Formations *x*).

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[2] McConachie combines Gramsci's "hegemony" with Kenneth Burke's rhetorical strategies to develop his own alternative approach to theatre history. This approach is outlined in his "Towards a Postpositivist Theatre History" as well as the chapter "Using the Concept of Cultural Hegemony to Write Theatre History," in Postlewait and McConachie 37-58. His use of Burke comes from (among others): The Philosophy of Literary Form, 3rd ed. (1941; rpt. Berkeley and Los Angeles: U of California P, 1973); and Attitudes Toward History, (1937, rpt. Boston: Beacon, 1961), among others.

Many of these writers also lament the lack of a more general "context" in which students may understand these ideas, individuals and events. Bonnie Marranca says that "many students have no concept of a culture, a heritage, a society" (70), while Paul Kuritz asserts that this is his primary reason for writing this kind of integrated history: "In the past a history of an art could discuss just that art, with the assurance that readers brought with them a knowledge of the world. That is not the case today" (*xi*). If a sense of unified culture is missing, what can or should be our response as educators? Do we need to create one? This seems unlikely, if not impossible.

Thomas Postlewait offers his own comments on the development of effective strategies for understanding and communicating theatre history. In his article "Historiography and the Theatrical Event" Postlewait exposes the assumptions of a three-step approach to history which suggests that interpretation only happens after objective facts have been collected and organized in a value-free manner. Rather, he says, interpretation happens at each stage in the process: "the historian must negotiate between fact and theory at each of the three procedural stages" (159). In "The Theory of History," Marvin Carlson agrees:

> Deprived of a common authenticating discourse, today's historian must begin with theoretical questions. . . . The selection of topic and the orientation of the research thus involve the historical researcher in ideological concerns even before an investigation begins, and parallel concerns are encountered at every subsequent step of the study. (275-76)

Postlewait goes on to offer twelve "cruxes" or "persistent problems and demands that confront all historians in the tasks of research and writing" (162). These can also be understood as challenges to the teacher of theatre history. His list ranges from "the causes, motivations, aims, and purposes of the initiating agent or agents of a historical event" (163) to "the reading formations, assumptions, values, and expectations of each person who, as audience for the historical report, attempts to understand what is written about the event" (177). In between he deconstructs various social, ideological, cultural and rhetorical goals, purposes and methods which have led to the particular understanding of past events as significant. This kind of careful work is extremely valuable, but time-consuming for the classroom. It demands strict and careful

attention to fewer events or ideas without the broader contexts and movements surrounding them.

At this point it may be useful to speculate on the value of such general "themes" and movements. Certainly there are terms and ideas which are common in society which ought to be understood to be "educated:" one probably ought to know what "surrealism" is and why it is different from "absurdism." But this "postpositivist" approach to history, as McConachie describes it, suggests that localized and narrow approaches to history (characterized by some as a form of "microhistory") are the only way we can understand it. Broad contexts and sweeping generalizations may be useful constructs for talking about the movements of "history" over time, but they remain just that, "constructs." Elsewhere, Postlewait has problematized the whole idea of "periodization" in theatre history as excessively inconsistent and difficult to deal with (see his "Criteria").

None of these historians wants to do away with professional standards, however. Postlewait clearly states: "Historical study, which by definition presupposes a reality outside of subjective consciousness and systems of discourse, must challenge any assumption that all explanations are equally sufficient or appropriate" ("Historiography" 162). And in the introduction to an essay on the contemporary understanding of "Evidence and Documentation," Joseph Donohue states that "good scholarship is good partly because, at least implicitly, it acknowledges its methods, describes its goals, and recognizes the perceived limits of its coverage and usefulness" (177). This kind of self-awareness is an important element in proper scholarship, and always has been. Now it appears that it must be expanded to recognize political elements and other influences on individual writing style, sources, and even our positions as teachers or students.

Kathleen McCormick advocates a reorganization of the curriculum (in her case the literature curriculum) around "issues" rather than periods or individual authors, which are the traditional methods favored in English departments. Within this new approach to "teaching theorizing" the whole classroom experience is negotiated between teacher and student. For her, students must commit to theories because, as her title states, we are "always already theorists"

(114), though not always aware of the "theories" which underlie our actions, choices, teaching and writing. She puts the challenge this way: "The process of increasing the students' capacities to commit themselves to a particular way of thinking requires a dialogic, problem-posing, learning environment" (120).

Richard Ohmann writes along similar lines regarding the importance of historical context to any kind of literary analysis. Like Kecht and McCormick, he emphasizes the political function of history: "a sane historical sense has to define itself as *critical* of both official history and the power relations that sustain it and are sustained by it" (174). Like the other historians and theorists noted above, Ohmann emphasizes the "network of economic and social relations" (178) which surround and influence the historical narrative. As a professor of literature, however, Ohmann recognizes the danger of "privileging the nonliterary texts in the course as unchallengeable reports on how things really were" (184). In the case of theatre history, we examine numerous "nonliterary" sources to discover something about what theatre was like: Pepys' and others' diary entries about attending the theatre; Serlio's drawings for tragic, comic and satyric scenes; Bishop Aethelwold's 965 *Regularis Concordia*; and countless other documents and sources. Because we do have evidence to consider beyond (sometimes even without) the text itself, we may think we have the whole story, or take at face value the more general histories of England, the United States, and so forth, without recognizing their own limitations and biases in perception. We continually have to attempt "not to sanction. . . a simplistic view of direct access to historical truth" of any kind (Ohmann 185).

Oscar Brockett and Bruce McConachie epitomize two current approaches to theatre history. The first is scientific, positivist and comprehensive. The second is more interested in cultural history, hegemony, power issues and social conflict. There are many other theatre historians who fit more or less into one or the other of these camps. Paul Kuritz, a student of Brockett's, neatly straddles the fence with his Making of Theatre History (1988). He attempts to be comprehensive in writing a narrative history of theatre amid the socio-cultural forces and institutions which surround it. The result is a relatively short, relatively comprehensive text divided according to dates, "movements," and geography, which allows periods to overlap. The

current emphasis in theatre history writing, however, is much closer to McConachie's, as Oscar Brockett points out by simply looking at the subjects and concepts of articles in ATHE's Theatre Journal since 1979 (Engle and Miller 5). Theatre historians who have appropriated these ideas, theories and techniques in their analyses include Thomas Postlewait, Joseph Roach, Joseph Donohue, Tracy Davis, Marvin Carlson, and Alan Woods, to name just a few.[3]

Still, the classroom professor asked to teach undergraduate theatre students the history of their art tends to favor Brockett's approach. Jerry Dickey's 1992 collection of Theatre History syllabi from around the country illustrates this fact: of 37 undergraduate theatre history courses for which he presents syllabi, 23 use Oscar Brockett's History of the Theatre as a primary reading text (Dickey and Oliva 49), most supplementing it with readings from plays and various documents of theatrical history (for example, many require Alois Nagler's Source Book in Theatrical History). These astounding numbers indicate a couple of things. First, they show that Brockett's is one of few "comprehensive" theatre history texts available. Teachers prefer to use as few texts as possible, to keep both cost and confusion to a minimum for their students. There is no denying, either, that Brockett's book exhibits good scholarship and writing style, and is an important reference source. However, the extensive reliance on this singular source reflects the consistent idea of history as a collected (and limited) body of knowledge which must be known and understood: a group of dates and names, movements and "isms," which students are expected to study, learn, and retain.

Dickey and Oliva suggest some places for improvement based upon the syllabi collected in the 1992 exchange project in their 1994 Theatre Topics article. They recommend that teachers of theatre history should:

> (1) Provide greater attention to expanding the traditional boundaries of historical inquiry in an integrated fashion.

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[3] Many of these writers can be found in Postlewait and McConachie. Titles include: Tracy C. Davis, "Questions for a Feminist Methodology in Theatre History;" Marvin Carlson, "Theatre Audiences and the Reading of Performance," which focuses on semiotics; Thomas Postlewait, "Autobiography and Theatre History;" Alan Woods, "Emphasizing the Avant-Garde: An Exploration in Theatre Historiography." Joseph Roach contributes "Evidence and Documentation," and his "Theatre History and the Ideology of the Aesthetic," Theatre Journal 41 (1989): 155-68, is another important example which draws on literary theorist Terry Eagleton.

(2) Explore methods of organization other than that of linear chronology.

(3) Draw on the knowledge of what we know to understand and explain what we do not know.

(4) Explore opportunities for students to conduct historical inquiry through applied research.

(5) Provide greater attention to historiography.

(6) Re-examine pedagogical presentation style in an effort to encourage active learning. (49-53)

Knowledge of the past is of the utmost importance. It is especially important in the performing arts, where audiences remember what they have seen before, and producers must know if and when they are copying, parodying, or applying techniques and knowledge from the past. Bonnie Marranca points out that "the historical avant-garde knew its artistic and cultural past which was continually drawn from as a living archive of texts and images" (70). We must be constantly aware of our own relationship to the past. We cannot know how people felt and believed and lived and loved in past generations the same way we can in our own. Even in our own generation we are limited to and by our own personal experiences. The intensive reliance of historical writing on documents (as one of the few links to the past) showcases the limitation of such study, since many significant aspects of our daily life simply are not written down because they are second nature. Movements in the study and preservation of "popular culture" are changing this, but there are probably still interesting and significant aspects of our lives which our own cultural blinders prevent us from seeing or "documenting."

We may or may not be able to discover what our own particular kind of history writing "says" about us as a society or a culture, but a "deconstructive," "postpositivist" approach to historiography can be valuable in looking at past times and places. Particularly in the ephemeral art form of theatre, which leaves only stages, memoirs, props, and occasionally printed programs or reviews, it is extremely valuable and important to place performances in the more general social and cultural context in which they were first viewed. Given that this goal *per se* is unachievable, we try to understand what we can from our own perspective about the "reading" of

performance in the past. At the same time, we must position ourselves clearly, recognizing the limitations of our own reading, writing and teaching.

For the classroom teacher, this does not mean constantly apologizing for one's gender, race, or geographic origin. Rather, it means recognizing the varieties of interpretation which are possible given the few facts we do have, whether director's notes, biographies, or theatre buildings. Margaret Wilkerson writes about the challenges to college instructors which are posed by the shifting demographics of the contemporary academy: "The questions raised are so fundamental that they force us to reconsider our most sacrosanct notions--our canon, our period concepts, our curriculum, and our methods of structuring knowledge and ideas" (240).

Given this situation, it seems to me that the more original texts and documents can be examined, the better. This means not only opening the course up to examine documents rather than textbooks, but broadening the range of documents which are included. The student ought to be allowed the opportunity to come to her or his own conclusions about the material, its meaning and its importance. This should not be read as total relativism. I am not advocating value-free history teaching. "Good" history becomes that which is aware of its own limitations, and attempts to fill in as much of the "context" or "field" of the area of research as is possible. This may be done as "microhistory," "history from below," or any other number of approaches. The important purpose is an integrative curriculum which, as Wilkerson and many of the other writers cited here suggest, forces itself to question its very position and values, constantly changing to incorporate diverse and challenging elements. We should embrace new historiographical theory as a tool for revisioning the study of history in our classrooms, and involve students physically, mentally and spiritually in the search for personal re-constructions of the past: in this case, the theatrical past.

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